

Blind eye to brainwashing

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February 1, 2015

In its most important contribution, the recently *released US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Study of the CIA's Detention and Interrogation Program* sifts through some six million classified documents to rebut the CIA's claim that torture produced actionable intelligence. All the agency's assertions that torture somehow stopped terrorist plots or led US special forces to Osama Bin Laden were shown to be false, and sometimes knowingly so. Immediately after release of the report, CIA director John Brennan was forced to admit that any link between torture and actionable intelligence is "unknowable."

The Senate committee's study, otherwise known as the "torture report" fails to ask or answer a critical question: If the intelligence yield from torture was so consistently low, why was the CIA so determined to persist energetically in these brutal but unproductive practices for so long?

Among the many possibilities or probabilities the Senate failed to explore is that the CIA's torture programme was not primarily intended to obtain information but to reverse the loyalties of captured enemy combatants or even abducted civilians, so that after being tortured and psychologically "turned" they worked for American special forces in "pseudo operations". The term "pseudo



Mock executions, used routinely to increase stress levels of detainees.

operations" as it is referred to in intelligence parlance, indicates the use of organized teams disguised as guerrilla or insurgent groups for long- or short-term penetration of insurgent-controlled areas. As retired US Army Military Intelligence officer Dr Lawrence E Cline describes it in his monograph *Pseudo Operations and Counterinsurgency*, published in 2008 by the US-based Strategic Studies Institute, the role of "turned" insurgents who have been "persuaded" to change sides by torture or by threats against their families, is "critical" in counter-insurgency operations.

Such operations, according to Dr Cline, have been "a very successful technique used in several counterinsurgency campaigns ... providing critical human intelligence and other support." He explains that pseudo team success is based largely on weakness in insurgent command and communications systems, so that pseudo forces can thrive in environments in which guerrilla forces have problems in their communications and in which centralized control of the insurgent groups has been weakened.

As detailed in *Pseudo Operations and Counterinsurgency*, and in other reliable studies, pseudo-team strategy and tactics are not a recent phenomenon. American forces used it in 1948 against communist insurgents in the Philippines. It was developed and used routinely as part of the CIA's infamous Phoenix programme in South Vietnam. From there it was exported to Latin America and Asia under the guise of police training programmes. It was also used by British colonial forces in Kenya and Malaya, and by France in Algeria during the 1950s, again by Britain in Northern Ireland during the 1970s, and more recently by apartheid forces in Rhodesia and South Africa.

It is possible, at least notionally, that in the Levant, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and northern Pakistan, pseudo operators under the supervision of Western coalition special forces are deployed to this day in the "war on terror". Such clandestine activity might include the acquisition by pseudo operators of GPS coordinates on the ground for precision air strikes using laser-guided missiles aimed at assassination targets. That may well be speculative at this time, but it is certainly true that the manner and method of pseudo operations are flexible and varied, tailored to shifting political agendas, dictated by local conditions, and virtually boundless in their subversive application.

In post-apartheid South Africa, for example, the Truth Commission in the 1990s heard evidence of how "turned" freedom fighters were used by counter-insurgency forces during the apartheid era to incite internecine factional violence, and also to lead genuine anti-apartheid cadres into ambushes by government security forces. Pseudo operators, referred to by the security forces as "*askaris*" were also trained to tamper with explosives and grenades, which would later explode prematurely in the hands of loyal cadres.

The South African Truth Commission also heard evidence of how, in South West Africa (now Namibia), captured freedom fighters who resisted "turning" were injected with a drug having the effect of leaving the victims fully conscious but physically paralyzed, before they were thrown into the Atlantic from military aircraft. During the interrogation and conditioning of Namibian detainees, interrogators also sometimes administered a drug called scopolamine, which has the ability to wipe its victim's memory clean, so that the next day there is no recollection of what transpired while under its influence.

In neighbouring Rhodesia, meanwhile, "turned" guerrillas posing as genuine national liberation forces murdered Christian missionaries and bombed churches — atrocities that were then propagandized by the media to demonise the national liberation movement as "communist atheists".

Dividing the enemy

The use of pseudo teams by Rhodesian and South African counter-insurgency forces was nothing new in Africa. In Algeria during the 1950s, "turned" agents infiltrated the national independence movement and mingled with cadres in areas where they were known and trusted by the local population. The agents planted incriminating forged documents, spread false rumours of treachery within the ranks of the liberation

movement and succeeded in fomenting distrust among the independence fighters. It resulted in a frenzy of throat-cutting and disemboweling among the confused and suspicious cadres. A scholarly article titled “France and the Algerian War: Strategy and Operations”, published in the June 2002 issue of the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, quotes



Sensory disorientation: detainees at Guantanamo Bay "laboratory", forced to wear blacked-out goggles and industrial earmuffs. Surgical masks prevent them from spitting at guards.

a former senior counter-insurgency officer of the French colonial army in Algeria: “Nationalist slaughtered nationalist from April to September 1957 and did France’s work for her.”

Strategy and tactics of that nature are applauded by the Strategic Studies Department of the US Joint Special Operations University in Florida, USA. An unclassified 2005 monograph published by the university under the title *Dividing Our Enemies*, states in glowing terms: “Having our enemies eliminate each other offers advantages over slug-it-out methodologies ... While lacking the glamour of direct action missions, the effects of special operations teams on the ground conducting unconventional warfare, psychological operations, and civil military operations are absolutely central to achieving an end-state of

realizing democratic and viable governments. These are the special operations ways and means that can lead to successfully leveraging inherent human fault lines to counter terrorism.”

A comprehensive list of known pseudo operations is not within the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that the term “turning” or its pejorative variant “brainwashing”, and the use of pseudo operators, are notably absent from the heavily redacted torture report. But, despite the CIA’s ability to selectively shape the narrative through redaction and omission, copious documentation acknowledging the existence such operations is available in the public domain, and there is nothing the CIA or the US Department of State can do about it.

“Brainwashing”

The CIA cannot claim ignorance of the subject, since it was the CIA itself that had first coined the term “brainwashing”. The first printed use of the word was in September 1950, when the *Miami News* published an article by Edward Hunter titled “Brain-Washing Tactics Force Chinese into Ranks of Communist Party”. Hunter, a CIA propaganda operator working under cover of a journalist, subsequently turned out a steady stream of articles on the subject.

Facing congressional investigations in 1973, the CIA acknowledged it had “experimented” with brainwashing, claimed it “did not work”, and allegedly destroyed its research records. In short, brainwashing existed only when the communists did it — as if the parameters of torture had not been well known to interested parties for a number of years.

The “torture report” fails to acknowledge explicitly the practice of brainwashing, otherwise known as “conditioning”, “mind control”, “conversion”, “turning”, “behaviour modification”, or even “mind kinesis”. The closest the report comes to admitting the existence of such practices, is in its quotation of a terse submission by the CIA in the Senate’s largely overlooked Minority Report, which accompanied the main report. The CIA asserted that “enhanced interrogation techniques” were applied “not only for security but for other valid reasons” including “transitioning”. The CIA never did explain what torture or “enhanced interrogation techniques” have to do with “security”, nor did it specify what exactly were those other, supposedly “valid reasons” and “transitions”.

Nor did the Senate committee, in its ostensible quest for edification, to seek clarification of those particular “transitions”, which were meant by the CIA to justify practices such as: continuous loud noise; 24-hour shackling in stressful positions, including sometimes standing on broken bones; hooding; sensory disorientation; extended sleep deprivation; temperature manipulation; suffocation and the sensation of drowning through “water boarding”; forced rectal “hydration”; sealing detainees into coffin-like boxes; staging of mock executions, as well as making threats to kill or rape detainee family members; and the general inducement of pain, humiliation and anxiety.

Perhaps, in its investigations, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence thought these “enhanced interrogation techniques” had nothing to do with brainwashing or the “turning” of prisoners. This is odd, given that physical and psychological torture have directly and through its proxies been integral to US foreign policy and covert strategy since at least the end of World War II. Among documents in the public domain is the Senate’s own 1976 report, *Project MKULTRA, the CIA’s Program of Research in Behavioural Modification*, compiled by the Senate’s Select Committee on Health and Scientific Research. The report established that the CIA and other US government agencies had since 1950 conducted ultra secret experimental research into psychological conditioning experiments performed on human subjects, the hidden costs of which eventually reached nearly a billion dollars a year.

Perhaps the CIA’s most recent plunge into the cesspool of psychological operations is buried somewhere among the redactions of the 2014 torture report. Or perhaps nobody on the committee wanted to accept that human nature is so pliable that prisoners can actually be “turned”. Or perhaps they just wondered: “Where’s the science?” Whatever the reason or reasons for the Senate report’s omissions, it is certainly true that the science is there, and has been for a long time.

The Science

It all started with the Russian behavioural scientist Ivan Pavlov during his famous experiments with dogs in the early 1900s. Pavlov's experiments with animals, documented in a 1928 paper titled *Lectures on Conditional Reflexes: The higher nervous activity (Behaviour) of animals*, opened the door to scientific investigations with humans.

In June 1956, US Airforce psychiatrist Dr Albert D Binderman presented a paper at a Senate hearing and before the Academy of Medicine in New York the following year, in which he identified several stages that “subjects” of psychological torture go through in the “turning” or conversion process. Binderman, who had never served in Korea nor been a prisoner of war, nonetheless claimed his research was based on methods “used by Chinese torturers” during the Korean war. In 1961, he later co-edited an academic book titled *The Manipulation of Human Behaviour* published in New York by John Wiley and Sons. Among other things, it endeavours to provide a scientific explanation for why, after the Korean ceasefire, a number of former American prisoners of war had renounced their American citizenship and elected to remain in Korea rather than return to the US. Hollywood, the mass media and the scientific community dutifully lapped it up. The ex-POWs had been “brainwashed”.



Psychologists Bruce Jensen and James Mitchell, were paid \$8-million for supervising the CIA psychological conditioning programme.

According to behavioural scientists and neurophysiologists contributing to *The Manipulation of Human Behaviour*, a state of behavioural collapse can be induced by physical and emotional stress prior to inducing new patterns of actions and beliefs in a phenomenon known scientifically as “transmarginal inhibition”, a term first coined by Pavlov, meaning behavioral conversion or TMI for short. Successful application of this conditioning process requires psychological torturers to have total control of the environment. Existing mental programming can then be replaced with new patterns of thinking and behaviour. The same results can be obtained in contemporary psychiatric treatment by electric shock treatments and even by purposely lowering a patient's blood sugar level with insulin injections. A scientific protocol was developed by the torturers, involving the measurement of torture victims' hormonal fluctuations, in which vomit, or saliva and blood samples are taken at regular intervals to assess neuro-physiological reactions to the “turning” process.

The ways to achieve conversion through TMI are many and varied, including sensory disorientation through temporal and environmental manipulation such as sleep deprivation, protracted isolation, and extremes of heat and cold, light and dark, noise and

silence, isolation and intensive interrogation. The usual first step in achieving TMI is to work on the emotions of an individual or group until they reach an abnormal level of anger, fear, excitement or nervous tension. The progressive effect of this mental condition, when combined with pain and the threat of imminent death, is impairment of judgment and increased suggestibility. The more this condition can be maintained or intensified, the more it compounds, leading to total behavioural conversion.

A report by Senate's Armed Forces Committee on Detainees had in 2008 already confirmed the existence of a "Behavioural Science Technical Team" at Guantánamo naval base, acting in liaison with US Army Special Forces Command, and with the approval of the Bush administration. At this behavioural science "laboratory", Binderman's teachings were supplemented by the behavioural theories of Professor Martin Seligman, a Doctor of Humane Letters from the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology and former president of the American Psychological Association. Involved in supervising the Guantánamo torture laboratory, were two civilian psychologists operating as a commercial company registered under the name Mitchell Jessen & Associates. From 2005 to 2010, their firm was paid \$81-million by the US government. Although the Senate's 2014 torture report declined to refer to the two psychologists by name, reputable investigative journalists in leading US media, to their credit, later exposed the psychologists' identities.

Since these civilian psychologists were not trained interrogators but were none the less physically present at Guantánamo and other secret torture centers, it is reasonable to deduce their presence was not intended to obtain information or confessions, but to assist behavioural conversion or "turning" through psychological conditioning.

"Some folks"

It appears from the declassified version of the 2014 torture report that Senate investigators were content to conduct only 119 case studies of detainees tortured from 2002 to late 2009. The report seems to turn a blind to the untold thousands of "terrorist" detainees delivered by the CIA, or by the US military or Special Forces units, to military detention centers at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, Bagram in Afghanistan, and to 50 or more secret "black site" prisons in US client states scattered around the globe. The report also fails to acknowledge the sequestration and interrogation of prisoners aboard US Navy vessels stationed in international waters.

According to an investigation conducted by researchers for the British-based human rights organization Reprieve, no less than 17 US Navy amphibious docking vessels equipped with hovercraft and helicopters were or still are deployed in this particular aspect of the CIA's "interrogation" programme. The vessels, being flat-bottomed, are capable of operating in the shallow coastal waters of the Middle East, making them ideal for secret abduction operations and also for quietly returning "turned" prisoners or abductees back to the mainland, for reintegration into insurgent groups where they would be known and unsuspectingly trusted as genuine loyalists.

The declassified sections of the torture report apparently ignore an earlier 226-page study compiled by United Nations experts and submitted to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2010. The culmination of a year-long investigation, the human rights study compiled by the Council's working groups on arbitrary detention and enforced or involuntary disappearances of what the CIA described as "high value targets". Referred to by the Council as "ghost detainees" they were held without being accounted for by the US military police, without the military police knowing or revealing their identities, or even the reason for their incarceration. Some "ghost detainees" were also hidden from inspectors of the International Committee of the Red Cross, in flagrant violation of reporting and monitoring requirements under the Geneva Convention on prisoners of war.

The US, in applying extreme secrecy around the incarceration of "ghost detainees", conceivably drew inspiration from Israel, its closest ally in the Middle East, with decades of experience in the torture and interrogation of Arab insurgents. Israeli intelligence is known to have operated for many years a "ghost prison" in Israel for political detainees and suspected insurgents. This secret prison for so-called "special cases", code-named Facility 1391, is absent from maps of the region, it has never been openly acknowledged by the Israeli government, and it exists within the walls of a secret army base to which Red Cross inspectors were denied access. Nor has Facility 1391 ever been officially declared a detention facility, as required by Israeli law.

What is known with some certainty though, is that the question of disappearances, abductions and "ghost prisoners" did raise embarrassing public questions for the US government, questions that the United Nations never did pursue openly, nor did the US government ever respond to the UN Human Rights Council's study —with the exception only of President Obama's lame admission in late 2014: "Yes, we did torture some folks".



USS Ashland, one of 17 US Navy amphibious docking vessels used as secret maritime "black sites" in America's torture programme.

"Some folks"? Reputable independent analysts and researchers have calculated the number of prisoners torture over the years to be at around 80,000 individual cases. Official declarations attempt to justify the secrecy surrounding the torture programme by claiming US military actions are dictated by the mandates of an "exceptional kind of war against a uniquely treacherous and broadly-defined enemy." The CIA's extensive redaction of the torture report, over a period of nine months, is consistent with the fact that in 2005 already the CIA had covertly destroyed 92 videos of detainee interrogations, according to a bipartisan US Senate Armed Services Committee report published in November 2008.

But over time, following the work of investigative journalists and independent researchers, and especially after leaks from within the CIA itself, the problem of CIA and US Joint Special Forces accountability grew so large as to become impossible to hide the monster that the US and its allies had created. This may be why the Senate was eventually authorized and obliged to report on the matter, in order to impart at least some veneer of respectability and democratic accountability on US foreign policy.

The fact remains, however, that less than 10 percent of the more than 600 pages of the 2014 torture report and its accompanying minority report compiled by Senate panel investigators are available to the public. The remainder of the report remains classified. There is no telling when, if ever, the public may eventually get to read it. Until then, the torture report — five years in the making and nine months in the redacting — might more appropriately be referred to as the “torture distort”.

(This essay was first published under a different title by Coldtype.net, in its February 2015 issue – www.coldtype.net)